

53



THE OBSERVER

1791

22 Tudor Street London EC4

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 14,

DIALOGUE ON CUBA

LAST week we criticised, fairly bluntly, the American obsession with Cuba and the almost universal demand in the United States that President Kennedy should "do something" about the Castro regime even if it means using force. We argued that such an attitude was inconsistent with the policy of coexistence.

Our leading article was answered by James Reston, one of the best and most liberal of all American commentators, in the *New York Times*. We reprint Mr. Reston's article on the opposite page and have no hesitation in returning to the subject today. We regard it as of supreme importance not simply because Cuba is dividing the Western Alliance, but because it is a test case for the future of the world.

Mr. Reston's case depends partly on the assumption that Cuba is, or at least could be, a real military threat to the U.S. He assumes, indeed, that there is already a Russian military base in the island. But this is not true. (The only base there is American.) According to evidence given to Congress by Mr. George Ball, the Under-Secretary of State, the Russians have supplied the Cubans with tanks and guns for their army, with fighter planes, and with anti-aircraft and anti-shiping missiles, but these are all clearly defensive weapons against a new invasion and not offensive weapons against America. Mr. Ball said that even if the missiles delivered to the Cubans were added together, they could not reach the coast of Florida.

IN theory, of course, the Russians could install larger missiles on Cuba, but for what purpose and at what cost? They already have inter-continental missiles and will soon have nuclear submarines. Whatever they put in Cuba, they could not defend the island from a determined assault by the U.S. To the Russians Cuba is militarily as much of a liability as West Berlin is to the Western Powers. (It also has some of West Berlin's political nuisance value.)

If, of course, Castro were to use his armed forces, with or without Russian approval, to attack a neighbouring country in Latin America, that would be a different matter. But in that case the U.S. would have the support of all her Allies—and probably of the United Nations—in stopping it. That would be aggression. But equally it would be aggression if the U.S. were now to attack and overwhelm Cuba merely because she dislikes Dr. Castro's brand of politics or his (perfectly legitimate) relations with the Soviet Union.

Mr. Reston also defends the American attitude towards Cuba by pointing out that it has a long history. Even President Jefferson wanted Cuba, and

arms to the Channel coast whereas a communist base in Cuba does not really do anything to the military power of Russia. In that case, war is no longer a tolerable choice on either side. Politically, the comparison makes the old American mistake of equating Communism with Nazism. Surely it is time that even the U.S. recognised that Communism is a complex and rapidly developing system, that it is not wholly evil and that it is precisely because it has some positive advantages to offer the less privileged peoples of the world that it is politically dangerous in parts of Latin America. Other peoples simply do not see Communism as all bad and Western civilisation as all good—a proposition which, for many powerful historical reasons, has more appeal to Americans than to ourselves and to other Europeans. We know we have a dubious historical past: they believe themselves immaculately conceived—a legend which makes them more prone to ideological attitudes than we are.

A FAR better parallel would have been Suez. Then many Britons certainly took for granted that Britain had a traditional right to assert her will against that of President Nasser and the Egyptian people. As a result the British Government acted with disastrous folly. But at least a very large minority—including all the British equivalents of Mr. Reston—protested loudly and tried to explain to the British people that political and military conditions had changed since the days of Lord Cromer and General Gordon. We did not quote what Lord Palmerston said in 1833—or even what Gladstone did in 1882.

What is deeply disturbing about American opinion on Cuba, as on so many subjects where Communism is concerned, is a kind of total blindness, a refusal even to consider another point of view, which seems to affect the whole nation from the *New York Times* to the Longshoremen. There is a complete lack of a political opposition or of any responsible commentators—with one or two courageous exceptions like Mr. Walter Lippmann and, usually, Mr. Reston himself. To challenge these prejudices, to urge tolerance (which should be the virtue of the West, just as intolerance and ideological certainty are the special vices of totalitarianism) is now a practical necessity and that coexistence with a pro-Communist Cuba is not immoral but a mark of sanity. Without such resistance to popular chauvinism even a responsible and liberal Administration like the present one may be pushed into some act of folly against its better judgment.

LAST week we criticised, fairly bluntly, the American obsession with Cuba and the almost universal demand in the United States that President Kennedy should "do something" about the Castro regime even if it means using force. We argued that such an attitude was inconsistent with the policy of coexistence.

Our leading article was answered by James Reston, one of the best and most liberal of all American commentators, in the *New York Times*. We reprint Mr. Reston's article on the opposite page and have no hesitation in returning to the subject today. We regard it as of supreme importance not simply because Cuba is dividing the Western Alliance, but because it is a test case for the future of the world.

Mr. Reston's case depends partly on the assumption that Cuba is, or at least could be, a real military threat to the U.S. He assumes, indeed, that there is already a Russian military base in the island. But this is not true. (The only base there is American.) According to evidence given to Congress by Mr. George Ball, the Under-Secretary of State, the Russians have supplied the Cubans with tanks and guns for their army, with fighter planes, and with anti-aircraft and anti-shiping missiles, but these are all clearly defensive weapons against a new invasion and not offensive weapons against America. Mr. Ball said that even if the missiles delivered to the Cubans were added together, they could not reach the coast of Florida.

IN theory, of course, the Russians could install larger missiles on Cuba, but for what purpose and at what cost? They already have inter-continental missiles and will soon have nuclear submarines. Whatever they put in Cuba, they could not defend the island from a determined assault by the U.S. To the Russians Cuba is militarily as much of a liability as West Berlin is to the Western Powers. (It also has some of West Berlin's political nuisance value.)

If, of course, Castro were to use his armed forces with or without Russian approval, to attack a neighbouring country in Latin America, that would be a different matter. But in that case the U.S. would have the support of all her Allies—and probably of the United Nations—in stopping it. That would be aggression. But equally it would be aggression if the U.S. were now to attack and overwhelm Cuba merely because she dislikes Dr. Castro's brand of politics or his (perfectly legitimate) relations with the Soviet Union.

Mr. Reston also defends the American attitude towards Cuba by pointing out that it has a long history. Even President Jefferson wanted Cuba, and generations of Americans have come to regard it as an essential part of their security system. Mr. Reston argues that American sensitivity to a Communist base in Cuba is no different from British sensitivity to the Nazi threat to the Low Countries.

This comparison seems doubly inept. Militarily, the Nazi invasion of Belgium and Holland brought the whole power of German

arms to the Channel coast whereas a Communist base in Cuba does not really add anything to the military power of Russia. In any case, war is no longer a tolerable choice for either side. Politically, the comparison makes the old American mistake of equating Communism with Nazism. Surely it is time that even the U.S. recognised that Communism is a complex and rapidly developing system, that it is not wholly evil and that it is precisely because it has some positive advantages to offer the less privileged peoples of the world that it is politically dangerous in parts of Latin America. Other peoples simply do not see Communism as all bad and Victorian civilisation as all good—a proposition which, for many powerful historical reasons, has more appeal to Americans than to ourselves and to other Europeans. We know we have a dubious historical past: they believe themselves immaculately conceived—a legend which makes them more prone to ideological attitudes than we are.

A FAR better parallel would have been Suez. Then many Britons certainly would not have granted that Britain had a traditional right to assert her will against that of President Nasser and the Egyptian people. As a result the British Government acted with disastrous folly. But at least a very large minority—including all the British equivalents of Mr. Reston—protested loudly and tried to explain to the British people that political and military conditions had changed since the days of Lord Cromer and General Gordon. We did not quote what Lord Palmerston said in 1833—or even what Gladstone did in 1882.

What is deeply disturbing about American opinion on Cuba, as on so many subjects where Communism is concerned, is a kind of total blindness, a refusal even to consider another point of view, which seems to affect the whole nation from the *New York Times* to the Longshoremen. There is a complete lack of a political opposition or of any responsible commentators—with one or two courageous exceptions like Mr. Walter Lippmann and, usually, Mr. Reston himself. To challenge these prejudices, to urge tolerance (which should be the virtue of the West, just as intolerance and ideological certainty are the special vices of totalitarianism) is now a practical necessity and that coexistence with a pro-Communist Cuba is not immoral but a mark of sanity. Without such resistance to popular chauvinism even a responsible and liberal Administration like the present one may be pushed into some act of folly against its better judgment.

